

MEMO: OPD Commission, Staff and Attorneys

FROM: Kenneth R. Olson, Commissioner

DATE: February 16, 2012

I'd like to make a few observations regarding recent developments within this organization. Most have to do with the events surrounding the selection of our new Chief, Bill Hooks.

In a recent letter to the Commission, Deirde Coughlan commented, in part, "... I also believe that rehashing concerns over the former Chief Public Defender are not constructive and the agency attorneys need to look to the future and not back." I wholeheartedly agree. Randi Hood contributed greatly to the formation, organization and progress of this agency. I, for one, appreciate her efforts. Some people have developed negative opinions about her leadership. Everyone is entitled to his or her opinion. But, anonymous, negative commentary about this area is and has been, in my view, extremely counter-productive. Ms. Hood, while still employed by the agency, is no longer the Chief. She no longer leads the agency. She does not direct the Commission, nor the new Chief. It is high time to get past all the negativity surrounding her and "look to the future" as we've been urged by Deirdre.

That future is personified by Bill Hooks. He brings a new face, a wealth of experience, an exciting vision and a depth of professionalism to the Chief's position. The Commission chose him following a lengthy, open and objective recruitment and interview process. Bill was the head of the Appellate Defender Office which pre-dated the existence of our agency. He has had a distinguished legal career and is a very personable, approachable gentleman. I urge everyone to give him your support and best efforts. He will have to cover a lot of ground to get fully up to speed. That task will be greatly enhanced by positive interaction with all involved within the agency. He has the full and enthusiastic support of the Commission.

It is a daunting task to be a public defender. It requires a special regard for the less fortunate in our society. It requires a dedication to fundamental civil rights that are only esoteric concepts to most people. It requires the courage and gumption to fight unpopular battles for less than sufficient financial rewards. It takes a big heart. It requires special people.

At our recent meeting, we saw a true public defender demonstrate the grace, commitment and attitude which embodies all those things. Dave Stenerson was surely very disappointed when informed of the Commission's decision not to appoint him as the new Chief. Yet, he immediately and publicly congratulated Bill Hooks. He, also, graciously offered to assist him in all ways, and as best as he can, to help Bill transition smoothly into the Chief's position. I was extremely proud of Dave in those moments. As a real leader, he showed by his actions how a classy, dedicated, selfless champion of the rights of the indigent conducts himself. Thank you, Dave, for reminding all of us what the mission of this agency is all about and the kind of professional one needs to be in order to promote it.

Again, let's rededicate ourselves to improving this agency; to enhancing our individual and collective abilities to forward our mission. Let us all make a better effort to accentuate the positive and pull together for the common good.

Thank you for your consideration. Best regards to all.

KENNETH R. OLSON  
Montana Public Defender Commissioner